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LEE WEEKS TALKS ABOUT GAMBIT!

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INTRODUCTION:

Comics fans know Lee Weeks best as the artist behind last winter's best-selling Predator Versus Magnus: Robot Fighter mini-series and Marvel's "Fall of The Kingpin" storyline, which culminated in the 300th Anniversary issue of Daredevil. To his fellow professionals, Lee has built a reputation as one of today's premiere graphic story-tellers, whose work has been praised by talents as diverse as Michael (Madman Adventures) Allred, and Archie (Legends of the Dark Knight) Goodwin.

Lee Weeks has also been a friend of mine for over a decade, making me the logical choice to interview him about his life, his work, and his current Gambit mini-series.

Bruce Canwell

LEE

"IN A CREATIVE SENSE, I WASN'T THAT JACKED UP FOR THIS PROJECT..."

Bruce Canwell: Let's begin by discussing Gambit, which is the most recent project you're involved with. How did you land this assignment?

Lee Weeks: I got this pretty much the way I've gotten almost every job. Someone calls me with the offer—in this case, [X-Men editor] Bob Harras. He really wanted me to do it. I knew Gambit had become a pretty popular character, and this was a chance to get my name out there a little more, and to work on an X-Men character, which is something I hadn't done.

The fact that I had worked with Howard Mackie on "Fear"—the Ghost Rider/Captain America book—had a little bit to do with it, also, because Howard's the one who's writing Gambit.

BC: Has the project met your expectations?

LW: Absolutely! As a matter of fact, in a creative sense, I wasn't that jacked up for this project until I got started, and as I've gotten into it I've built up an incredible amount of interest in it.

Something that helps a lot is always having different things to draw, different settings—I was working on a cityscape of Paris earlier today, which is something I've never gotten to do, although mine is more of a collage of all the different types of buildings in Paris. I didn't have a specific shot to go from, so I pieced some things together to give it the "Paris look." I'm primarily concerned with the storytelling part of it, so if people look at it and go,"That's supposed to be Paris"—and obviously, if you throw the Eiffel Tower in there, who's going to think it's Podunk, Missouri?—you're going to know that it's Paris. But I did try to keep the architecture similar to what's in my references. I have a book on Paris, and I pulled out my National Geographics that feature articles on Paris, too.

BC: What about the characters? What sort of pleasures are you finding in doing the character of Gambit?

LW: The geographical stuff is more of a peripheral interest, but that's one thing that always interests me throughout any project, getting to

do different places. It's kind of like going there.

The characters themselves—I have to be very frank. I'm still learning about Gambit. I know he's this Cajun from New Orleans— early on I discovered that I was drawing his eyes wrong! The whites of his eyes are black and the irises are red. I thought this was just part of the style that one of the X-Men artists was working with, but then I found out that, in fact, he doesn't have normal human eyes. He's also got a kind of an attitude I'm trying to figure out, though I like it, I think. He smokes cigarettes; smoking is terrible, but it's kinda neat to look at in some characters, and it fits my view of him.

I also got a chance to draw Wolverine and Storm, which was great. Any time I get to draw any of the Marvel characters that I grew up reading, the nostalgia aspect of it is always fun for me. Even if I'm working on something that otherwise isn't that exciting, drawing a character that I was reading maybe 10 years before I got my first work is a neat thing.

BC: You're putting your own stamp on the mythology.

LW: Yeah, yeah. And maybe I try to do something a little different with the look of the character. Maybe the way I spot the blacks and use the light source, or whatever. It's just a neat thing for me.

BC: My understanding is that part of Gambit's mystique is that he has this aspect of mysterioso. Nobody is really one hundred percent sure of his motivations.

LW: True. Gambit was a thief in New Orleans, and he has an association with The Thieves' Guild, which comes into play almost immediately in our first issue. We meet more of Gambit's family and surrogate family during this series, too.

BC: Is that part of the goal, to lift the veil a bit and unravel a mystery or two about Gambit?

LW: It seems that's the way it's going, yes.

BC: That would make sense. If you're going to spotlight the character in a mini-series, you want to get the reader inside his head a little

bit, to end up with a better idea of what's making him tick.

LW: Right. And there's also a big play-up of the romantic tension between Gambit and Rogue. (They're kind of the Sam and Diane of the X-Men.) There's plenty of that and it's a back and forth thing. I think I can tell you this, it happens right off the bat--the two of them are in the Danger Room and Rogue is being stand-offish and curt. Gambit is making all kinds of overtures to her and being very debonair, but Rogue's not having any of it. Then Gambit is distracted to the point where he almost gets killed by something in the Danger Room. Rogue has to save him, and at that point she lets down her defenses as they're kind of tussled up on the floor together, but just as she allows herself to become vulnerable to him, he turns the tables on her.

BC: Part of the twist to their whole relationship is that she can't get physically involved with him because of the nature of her powers, right?

LW: Yeah, it's pretty painful. If I'm not mistaken, in the first Jim Lee [issue of] X-Men, Gambit did try to plant one on her, and he got blown through a wall, though it didn't kill him, because he's pretty powerful himself.

BC: So you're going to touch upon the sexual gamesmanship that's going on there?

LW: Definitely. You know, this process of trying to get comfortable with the characters happens to me when-

"ANY TIME I GET TO DRAW ANY OF THE MARVEL CHARACTERS THAT I GREW UP READING, THE NOSTALGIA ASPECT OF IT IS ALWAYS FUN FOR ME."

ever I get on a new book. When I did Daredevil, even though I was very familiar with those characters as a reader, I still feel it took a number of issues to get an artistic sense of comfort with them. As a matter of fact, I think it was probably just peaking at the end of my run. On Gambit, I'm actually spending more time on the individual pages to try to gain that level of comfort more quickly. I'm trying to find out who these guys are and how I want to play them gesture-wise, how I'm going to approach the pages in terms of composition, black-and-white composition, stuff like that.

I found myself being more aware and concerned about a particular look. I don't want to be swallowed up by that, and I hope it shows in the final product. But I think it behooves me to at least be aware of and concerned about what the audience of the X-Men projects are looking for. After all, I wouldn't expect to get a job with Disney drawing Mickey Mouse the way I drew Daredevil. There has to be some consideration for a particular look, though with Gambit I'm still trying to make it my look. I can't help but make it me.

It's going to be me, but I am trying to incorporate some other ways of doing things, ways that I've never done them before. See, the thing about my storytelling is, I never really feel set on any one way of doing anything, anyway. I don't feel like I have enough confidence to really say, "This is the way I tell a story."

I know there are certain things that show themselves on a consistent basis in my work that other people are aware of—certain ways I use an inset panel or focus on a piece of detail of the action or whatever. But I'm constantly trying to find some new way to help me tell the story better. Something I've consciously tried to do with Gambit is be a little bit more dynamic in my page layout. At times I wonder if it's dynamic enough, but I can't exaggerate to the point where it becomes MTV, quick cut, whammy jammy, in-your-face stuff. On the other hand, I look at past jobs I've done and wonder if my commitment to the story hasn't held me back at times, or been kind of a weakness. As far as making the story clear, being able to create a mood and an atmosphere, and use facial expressions—those things I

think I do well. I don't always choose the most dynamic way of portraying a scene. There are times when I've let a scene go by and I see the page after it's been printed and I go, "Man, if only I could do it over again, I could do it from this angle and it would be much more dynamic." So I am trying to stretch myself more that way.

BC: Can you think of an example where you've said that sort of thing to yourself?

LW: It's hard to think of like specific pages. [pauses] I know that the first 10 pages of "Fear," I felt were stiff. I would say after Captain America first appears in the book I hit some kind of stride, but early on there were pages where I could have maybe taken one piece of action and zoomed in on it more.

If you're really in control of the craft--which I'm not claiming to be, but I see a few guys out there who are—you know how to manipulate the reader throughout a book. You bring him down a little bit here so that when you bring him back up later on you'll have all these other levels of dynamism. You create peaks and valleys until you get to the real big climax. I think there are guys who do that brilliantly and then there are guys who have an obvious lack of control of the craft and just take it up to that one extreme and stay there all the way through, and that approach just doesn't have the impact.

"IF YOU'RE REALLY IN CONTROL OF THE CRAFT YOU KNOW HOW TO MANIPULATE THE READER THROUGHOUT A BOOK."

Take Batman: Year One, which I believe is one of the most perfect things ever done in a comic book. David Mazzucchelli gets so much impact out of taking you from the shot of Commissioner Gordon sitting on the end of the bed smoking a cigarette to a silhouetted panel of Batman running across the Gotham rooftops. There's no dialogue in the Batman panel, but it's the most dynamic panel in the whole damned book! That's because Mazzucchelli has an absolute, masterful control of the craft. He knows just how to mess with you and manipulate you to make you feel what he wants you to feel.

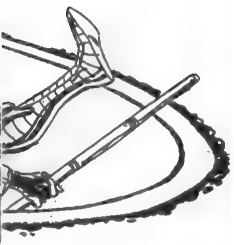
BC: Why don't we tackle this concept from a different point of view? Today there is a perception that a new artist on a series has to try to work in the same style as his predecessor, or the fans will quit the book in droves. If that's what's really going on it strikes me as a major change in the audience—when I was a kid in the 1960s, for example, reading the original X-Men book, the art duties passed from Werner Roth to Don Heck to Steranko to Neal Adams to Sal Buscema. That's a

"I'VE NOT ONCE BEEN TOLD HOW TO DRAW GAMBIT. I'VE NEVER ONCE BEEN TOLD HOW TO DRAW A SINGLE BOOK."

pretty wide range of styles! Now admittedly, I liked some guys' work better than others, but I never said, "New artist? Time to drop X-Men!" Do you really think it's necessary today to keep a constant "look" on a comic, no matter who the artist is?

LW: It think it depends on the book. Let me tell you how I felt when I came on to Daredevil: John Romita Jr. had been on the book for several years, and I was real conscious of the idea that a lot of the guys reading Daredevil had probably never seen any other kind of style on that book, either because they were younger kids just starting to read comics or because they had started reading Daredevil during J.R.'s run. Because of that, I didn't want my arrival to be really abrupt. Also, I was working with the same writer, so I was still working with the same approach to the story and I couldn't help but look at the last few Romita issues while I was getting started in order to help me figure out what was going on and for guidance in continuity. Just in looking at his stuff to try to get a foothold on the story, I couldn't help but be influenced by what he had done. I think the first couple of issues I did had a J.R. influence, much more so than the issues that followed. Seems to me that no matter how hard you try to be someone else, you can't help having your own artistic identity show through over time.

You know, I think a lot of people have a mistaken perception—I hear it sometimes from my friends I grew up reading comics with--in that they think Marvel has this house style



and they tell you how you're going to draw. "If you look at all the X-Men books it sure as hell looks like everyone's being told how to draw," people say. I've not once been told how to draw Gambit. I've never once been told how to draw a single book. No one's ever said to me, "Draw it like this guy."

It could be that sometimes this whole thing stems from within the artist himself—he may think people won't like his own stuff, but he knows people like this other guy's work, so maybe if he does it more like the other guy, he'll be more successful. I'm not saying that's always the case. I'm sure there are a lot of reasons this goes on.

But let's face it—the artists who've made enough of a splash to create this whole perception are the Image guys. Of that whole group I think Jim Lee is the most talented, but one thing probably underlies all of them, and that is that they have an unbelievable passion for what they're doing. You can't hide that. You can have all the skill in the world, if you're not pedal to the metal in love with what you're doing at the moment you're doing it, that's going to show first. I know when I do a dog page, the first thing

"ON IMAGE: ONE THING PROBABLY UNDERLIES ALL OF THEM, AND THAT IS THAT THEY HAVE AN UNBELIEVABLE PASSION FOR WHAT THEY'RE DOING."

that's missing from it is the fun. I did a few pages under a tough deadline situation recently and because I was motivated more by fear than lust for doing a kick-ass job, I could sense that the pages suffered a little bit because I think those other, distracting forces kind of choked off my creative juices.

You know, I hope this conversation isn't going to come off too eggheaded!

BC: OK, we'll shift out of theory and philosophy and get into some slice-of-life topics. Let's talk about your work habits and work ethic. I know a lot of people who say being a comic book artist must be one of the world's great jobs, but they're basing that opinion on the megabucks that people like Rob Liefeld and Todd McFarlane make, and the knowledge that many artists work at home, so they get to avoid a daily commute and having to deal with the petty politics of most work places. The reality is that an artist's life is not all beer and skittles. What's your typical work day like?

LW: Well, today was an atypical day for me because I actually took a break and left the house for lunch, which is usually real hard for me to do. I went and hit a bucket of golf balls with a friend of mine, trying to see

CREOLE MOTHERS IN THE FRENCH QUARTER OF NEW ORLEANS TELL THE STORY OF THE STRANGE, DARK MAN WHO ROLLS IN WITH THE FOG OFF THE MISSISSIPPI ONCE EVERY SEVEN YEARS.

who could slice the furthest. I couldn't hit a golf ball straight if my life depended on it!

BC: I tried golf one summer. I gave it up when I started feeling this enormous urge to wrap the club I was holding around the nearest tree limb. I said, "This is not my game, I can tell."

LW: Well, usually it's like I'm constantly fighting certain things, when it comes to work. If I get started after 8:00 I feel like I'm getting a late start and it really bothers me. I know some artists feel totally comfortable with starting at 10:00 or 10:30 and working a few hours, taking a break, working a few more hours, taking another break for dinner, and then maybe putting another hour or so late in the evening. Not me. I would ideally like to get started at 6:00 a.m. every morning and get done at the latest by 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening. I'd like to spend every evening with my wife and kids. It just doesn't work out that way. A lot of times I do have to work a lot of evenings and weekends. As a matter of fact my wife is taking our two kids to her sister's house for the weekend so I can get ahead on the next issue of Gambit.

"IF I GET STARTED AFTER 8:00 I FEEL LIKE I'M GETTING A LATE START AND IT REALLY BOTHERS ME."

But yeah, I actually hear that a lot: "Oh it must be so nice to work at home." I guess it is. There are a lot of benefits to it. I do feel I have a tremendous say in what I'm going to do next, how hard I want to work next month, or next year. But it's also not a cakewalk. There has to be a tremendous amount of self-discipline, and I think the more you get out on your own and have to take responsibility for things, the harder it is to maintain that discipline and I think the Image guys are living proof of that. So far Todd McFarlane has been the only one that's had any success at getting a book out on a regular basis. Now there's a guy with discipline!

Developing good work habits was something I really fought with for a couple of years when the money was lean and life was more of a paycheck-to-paycheck type thing—every time I stopped just to go to the head or get a cup of coffee it was, "God, I'm not getting paid now, I've got to be working, I've got to be working," because you only get paid for the work you do. It's not like I can just bill for the time and say, "Aaah, they'll never know." And a big part of the battle is deciding how challenging you want to make the work. If I wanted to cut back a little bit on my learning and just crank the stuff out, I could do a couple of books a month, but I could never be happy doing that.

I mean, I don't want to overstate things. I love the problems that I have. Well, I don't always love the problems, but if I had to choose to live life with a certain set of problems, I would choose this one, even

though it can be kind of frustrating at times.

BC: How about the constant struggle between quality and schedule? You know the old saying—"We want it good, and we want it Tuesday!" What sort of pressures and tradeoffs do you face in trying to make something as good as you can make it under a deadline?

LW: Well, I haven't done a regular book since Daredevil and Ifinished my last issue of that in October of '91. Then I told myself I was going to take at least a year and just do projects that didn't have real tough deadlines. I needed to do that for myself—there have been so many times I did pages where, even though I'm happy with the storytelling I did, it would have been nice to just render the hell out of a particular drawing. So I wanted to spend at least a year taking on projects that didn't have wicked deadlines and that would let me do a real good job and avoid the old "deadline doom." Living that way wasn't good for my health. I was getting sick a lot—I don't know how these guys like Kirby and Buscema did it! I guess I just have a low tolerance for stress, but fortunately I have not felt much in the way of deadline crunch in almost two years now. Oh, little bits here and there—like, I just finished some Dark Horse pages for Comics Greatest World, and though I was only doing four pages a month for them, it was on top of my regular Gambit stuff. I was also inking the Dark Horse pages, and it seemed like every month I got to a point where I was doing them at the last possible moment. Those pages are not real consistent, which bothers me.

BC: Why don't we take a look at how your career developed. Why not tell the folks at home about your schooling and what you got out of it?

LW: Well, right out of high school I went to the Portland School of Art in Portland, Maine. I was pretty clueless, didn't really know what I wanted. I had spent my senior year in high school periodically going over to this illustrator's agency, he had an empty table that he'd let me draw at for awhile, whenever I felt

like coming over and using his equipment. So I went to Portland School of Art, thinking I wanted to be a graphic designer, because going into the arts isn't the most sensible choice to make, especially if you're living in Maine. So I was trying to pick the most sensible thing in a non-sensible field, which was graphic design where I could get a job in an agency doing some grunt work and making a steady paycheck. Honestly, I don't think at the time I really had it that well thought out, I was just this clueless 18-year-old who didn't know what the hell he was doing, and I wasn't very well equipped to appreciate where I was and what I was doing.

So after my first year at Portland School of Art I took a year off, working in a pizza joint. Then I found out that the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art was more

"I HAVEN'T DONE A REGULAR BOOK SINCE DAREDEVIL."

than just an ad in a comic book. I never took any of the ads in comic books seriously—they were for x-ray glasses and real two-man submarines and stuff like that! So I thought this cartoon school was nothing but a goof. I didn't know who Joe Kubert was, but I met a mutual friend of ours, a guy named Mike Dudley, and Mike had spent a year down at the Kubert School and all of a sudden that idea achieved a level of credibility for me that it never would have otherwise. So I attended the Kubert School in '83 or '84, though I never graduated—I'm a perpetual dropout! It was a different story this time, though.

I went to Joe's school wanting to redeem myself from being so out of it and lackadaisical in my approach to the schoolwork at the fine art school, so I worked my tail off and

virtually burned out. Captain Morgan spiced rum was my best friend through a lot of all-nighters, and in the end the demands I was putting on myself caught up with me. I needed some time off. I didn't draw for about seven or eight months and got a job at a Seven-11, working there for about a year.

In the middle of my stay at the Seven-11 another mutual friend of ours, Tom Field, and I came up with a story that he wrote and I drew called "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk." We pitched it to Eclipse's anthology book, Tales of Terror--it was our first shot and they bought the story. I kept picking up little jobs with Eclipse, enough to make rent.

BC: After the Tales of Terror story you got New Wave, right?

LW: Right, with a Bruce Jones Alien Encounters story in between.

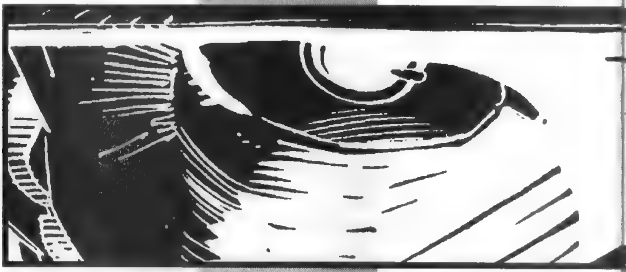
BC: Oh, right. I had forgotten about that story.

LW: Yeah, that was kind of neat. It was my second job and I got to work with Bruce Jones. That was a real kick for me although I never spoke with him. It was probably an inventory story for him. But New Wave, yeah, one of those fifty-cent bi-weekly kitty-litter books.

BC: That was, what? Twelve pages, bi-weekly?

LW: Twelve pages bi-weekly and we were already behind schedule before I got my plot for the first issue. For various reasons that is by far the worse work experience I've had on anything. It was a bad choice for such a young, inexperienced guy to make, taking on a rigorous schedule like that when I hadn't gotten comfortable with my skills. In some ways I think it set me back for a couple of years. That thing I was saying earlier about acting out of fear, closing up the creativity—I was a scared rabbit for about three years and I never approached the level of ability I showed at the Kubert School. I think there was a lot of my student work that was much better than any of the stuff that I was doing professionally. It was hell. It was real hell.

BC: Was it a learning experience in



"I WENT TO JOE'S SCHOOL WANTING TO REDEEM MYSELF FROM BEING SO OUT OF IT."

any way?

LW: Oh, yeah. I learned I'll never do that again.

BC: Well, finding out what you don't want to do is every bit as valid as finding out exactly what you do want to do.

LW: Anyway, my first job for Marvel was actually an inventory for D.P.7 that never saw print. I had gone over to the Marvel offices and really made sure I had a good presentation to give him, and I got a call from him giving me this D.P.7 fill-in. About two days after he gave me the job, I ended up breaking my hand— I had to call and tell this guy who had just given me my first job at Marvel that I broke my hand! But I eventually got it done, and I got a Solo Avengers story to do, as well.

BC: Featuring Doctor Druid, right?

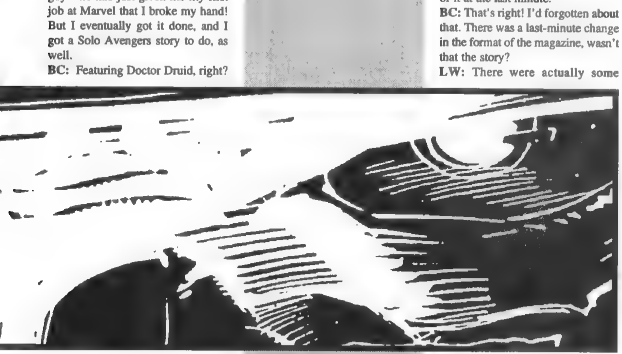
"DESTROYER WAS A BIG TURNING POINT FOR ME."

spawned a Grade-B movie that you can rent at most video stores, so there is interest and visibility to the characters. It seemed to me Marvel just said, "Hey, we're doing a Destroyer magazine—let's throw it out there and see if who'll buy it." Couldn't that series have been much more successful than it was?

LW: Will [Murray, writer of the series] and I always thought so. Destroyer was a big turning point for me, especially that first issue, because I really got to put a lot of time into it. I was feeling very proud when that issue came out, until I saw that six pages had been cut out of it at the last minute.

BC: That's right! I'd forgotten about that. There was a last-minute change in the format of the magazine, wasn't that the story?

LW: There were actually some



LW: Right! Dan Chichester, who wrote that story, calls him "Doctor Dopey."

BC: It's great to do an Elmer Fudd with his name: "Doctow Dwewwid."

LW: Yeah, but that was a real fun assignment for me, because they let me ink the job. Then I did Justice in the New Universe lineup. Then it was on to The Destroyer, a real fun series to work on, but it furthered my travels through obscurity.

BC: Don't you think The Destroyer could have done well if properly promoted? The paperbacks have sold well enough—there's, what, a hundred or so of them? And they

crossed signals. It was always going to be 48 pages, but that wasn't conveyed properly. Will and I had each double checked on a couple of occasions, because we had heard rumors and read in press releases that this was only going to be a 48-page magazine, and here we were doing a 54-page story. We were told it was 54 or not to worry about it.

BC: Famous last words.

LW: So Will and I did a weekend signing at the New England Comics chain, and that first issue came in while we were sitting in a diner, and we're opening it up feeling real proud, and then I flip to the back page, which is numbered "48," and

it's, "Oh, my God!" time. We kind of ranted and raved a little bit about them cutting those six pages out, but when you read it the editing doesn't show too badly. I mean, the lost pages would have helped the story, but at least it wasn't blatantly obvious that something was missing—there was only one balloon that referred to an event from those missing six pages.

After Destroyer it was Daredevil, and that was probably the biggest turning point for me. I think things improved drastically for me at that point, artistically and personally—my wife and I were expecting our first child and up to then we'd still been living a month-to-month, paycheck-to-paycheck existence, but when I knew there was going to be a little one depending on me it was like a light switched on—something just clicked, just took over and forced me to make some major choices. That's when I got Daredevil and everything has been a step ahead since. Every issue of that book was a step up and every project I've done since has been a step up in one way or another. It was real sad for me to leave Daredevil. I left the book for a couple of reasons, one of the bigger ones being financial—we had a second kid on the way, and my wife wanted to quit her job, and we both wanted her home, so I chose to seek out more lucrative projects.

BC: Which dovetailed with your feelings about trying to get away from a book with a regular deadline for awhile.

LW: Yeah, it was very healthy for me to leave something still wanting to do more on it. But, you know, the biggest thing I've had to learn, the hardest thing I've had to learn, is how to stand up for my work and have confidence in myself. Early in my career there was always a fear that I would lose my job, that it would all go away. So I kept a lot of things to myself until I reached the point where I decided I just wasn't going to keep it bottled up anymore. There have still been frustrations along the way, but I know that it will never get as bad as it once was, because when it does I'd rather go back to Seven-11, or I'd rather go

drive a truck. What dawned on me was that I had always loved doing this, and during the bad old days I hated doing it. I hated doing it for a good two or three years, I didn't get a creative reward out of comics. I got a paycheck out of it, but that wasn't why I had always wanted to do it. So I had to sort all that stuff out, and it was definitely my toughest lesson.

BC: Just to bring the discussion full circle, let's go back to Gambit and talk about the people you're teaming up with on this project. Let's begin with the writer, Howard Mackie, who also wrote "Fear." What do you see as his strengths as a writer?

LW: The first thing that pops into mind, for me personally, is I know Howard takes great care in whatever he's writing to think of me, of my strengths as an artist, and then he writes to those strengths. I'm into the second issue of Gambit now and I find that in both these issues and in the Ghost Rider "Fear" book we did together, there are scenes where it's like he's reading my mind. He's giving me stuff I really like to draw—a lot of the gritty street scenes, real opportunities for nice light/dark contrasts, moody settings, things like that. I always have the impression that he's thinking of me when he's writing.

BC: So that's a way that he's complementing you, in that he tries to set up things that will play to your strengths. How do his writing skills challenge you?

LW: There are times, as a result of him trying to give me creative freedom, when I need to work a little bit harder than maybe I'm used to. Sometimes it's a little looser than what I've been used to in the past. He looks for more input from me, and if I'm not aware of that then it can be more challenging than usual, especially because I'm not always confident at giving creative input on plot situations, not knowing if I'm overstepping my bounds.

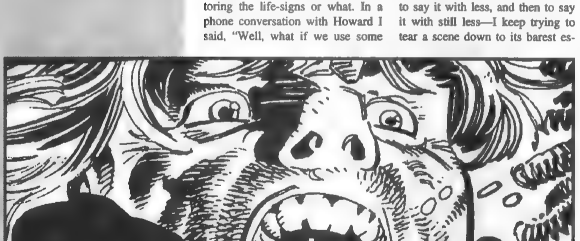
BC: Can you give me an example?

LW: When I got a partial plot for issue #2—and remember I'm not trying to take credit for anything here!—I got the first six pages of plot, and this opening scene has Gambit breaking into a big, opulent mansion on the outskirts of New Or-

"THE HARDEST THING I'VE HAD TO LEARN, IS HOW TO STAND UP FOR MY WORK AND HAVE CONFIDENCE IN MYSELF."

THIS IS A FAMILY MATTER.
HENRI LeBEAU WAS MY BROTHER!

leans. He comes to this particular room, and there's a person lying in bed in an unconscious or sleeping state. I learned a couple of pages after this in the plot that the person was in a near-death state, but I wasn't sure if this person should be connected with wires and tubes, and be hooked up to things to be monitoring the life-signs or what. In a phone conversation with Howard I said, "Well, what if we use some things that are appropriate to New Orleans, some voodoo type things and some incense, candles, and little idols that add some element of magic to it. We'll show that they're trying to cure this person with this approach, rather than with modern medicine." He said that sounded great,and he's worked it into the story now.



"I THINK ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING PARTS OF THE JOB IS TO TRY TO SAY SOMETHING WITH LESS."

BC: So you guys are batting things back and forth to a certain degree.

LW: I would never presume to say I have that much input. This has only happened a couple of times. It happened in the real small pieces, although this one example is a larger example. These are just things that happen periodically. They're infrequent and I'm not there constantly bouncing ideas back and forth with Howard.

The other thing that's real challenging with Howard's writing at times is if he has a real specific idea of the visual pacing that doesn't always translate well to me right off the bat. I might look at a particular block of the plot that's written for three pages of artwork and I'm saying, "Gosh, how the hell am I supposed to do fit this in three pages?" Of course, I think one of the most challenging parts of the job is to try to say something with less, then to say it with less, and then to say it with still less—I keep trying to tear a scene down to its barest essentials without losing its whole thrust.

BC: Maybe we need to detour back into storytelling theory for a bit. What happens when you get a plot that calls for action to occur in x number of pages, but you feel it needs to run x plus one pages in order to be told the best way possible? Do you take pains to figure out how to bring it in according to the writer's plan, or do you allow yourself the freedom of that extra page?

LW: I do feel I have the freedom to add an extra page, even at the end of the story if I really feel like I want to expound upon something visually. I feel like I have that freedom, but I've hardly ever used it and I think it's something that I shouldn't have to use very often. I consider it a part of professionalism to do the job within the boundaries given. That's not to say it's unprofessional the times I've done

IT'S THEM, THE ASSASS GUILD
...THEY DON'T WANT THE TITHING TO TAKE PLACE...
WA DE
W IT... YO OU

ZEMY...
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YOU'RE NEEDED. YOU KNOW DERE AYS... DON'T LET M GET IT... IT'S OURS...
E'VE EARNED USE WHAT U KNOW... FIND T WHAT YOU DON'T!

it, but those times I've chosen to add an extra page, the addition really has had to make sense. It has to be of a deliberate nature. It can't be, "Oh, jeez, I just didn't figure this out right, so I'm going to need that extra page." It can't be as a result of that.

Most of the writers I've worked with, they tend to break down the plot into groups of pages: page one, pages two through three, pages four through seven, or whatever. On my end I view that as a rough guideline of how the writer sees the story, but I've almost always had the trust of the writer to just play with that, however I feel I can make it most effective. When I see a three page block that makes me wonder how the hell I'm going to finish in three pages—well, something I'm trying to play around with more is panel composition and not feeling that I can't go beyond a certain number of panels per page and still have seem smooth and comfortable. I'm coming to realize there might be instances where a 12-panel page would be the best thing for that particular scene, providing the right amount of tension and the proper timing because of the motions and the movements between panels. I'm learning that and I'm trying to capitalize on those times when that happens.

Something I've tried to do in the past and I'll continue to look for opportunities to do is to compress the actions more and more as we reach a given point in a story. Say there's a splash page coming up. Four pages earlier I might do a page with four panels on it, then the next page is a five or six panel page, then next a seven or eight panel page, and then that page just before the splash is a 12-panel page so everything is kind of building to a claustrophobic, "Oh my gosh, there's no room here" type of feeling, so when you turn the page and there's that big splash there, it's very dramatic because it's creating a whole new element of contrast. That's something I try to do whenever the opportunity arises.

BC: OK, back to your Gambit partners. What about Klaus Janson, who'll be doing the inking? Let's

talk about him.

LW: Yeah, let's talk about him. Let's say all kinds of things about him that aren't true.

BC: Like, Jimmy Hoffa. Klaus Janson did him in.

LW: Seriously! I have a photograph of Klaus in Giants Stadium, leaning on a shovel after he's dug the grave. He's holding a beer in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other.

BC: And he's going to be inking your pencils, to boot. Have you seen an of the finished artwork yet?

LW: I am anxiously awaiting my first look. I really want to see it. Last I heard, Klaus had been inking five pages at the same time and hadn't finished any single one, or maybe he just wanted to get more pages done before he turned any in. It was something like that. But I am definitely looking forward to seeing what he does.

BC: Do you think it's going to be strange to see someone else inking your art? For the last three or four years, basically it's either been you or it's been Al Williamson, who inked both "Fear" and your Daredevil run.

LW: Yeah. I have no idea what it's going to be like. And Al, if I can take a second here, is the consummate pro. When we did that first issue of Daredevil together, I think my first response when I saw the make-ready was—well, I could not believe that the pages were inked and it still looked like I had drawn it!

BC: Of course, up to that point you had worked with more than a few inkers who used a heavy hand.

LW: Yeah, but Al accomplishes both ends of the equation—there's no question that he has inked it, but from my standpoint there's also no question that I pencilled it. And it doesn't matter if he's taken his normal four hours on a page or if he's had to do it in an hour in a half, I can't tell the difference. He's just got a way...

BC: It's amazing how some guys just make it look so incredibly easy.

LW: And back to Klaus, since you're asking me about him, something that just hit me—back in '79 or so, when my interest in comics got rekindled as a junior in high school, I started to get back into collecting by buying old issues of Fantastic Four. But one of the first new things I bought and really got into was the Daredevil stuff at that time, the Frank Miller/Klaus Janson stuff. Now, being able to look at it with more of a knowing eye, I can see that Klaus brings a presence to whatever he works on. It's a style unlike anything I've seen from anybody else.

BC: Yeah. There are some inkers whose work you can look at and, without even seeing the credits, you can immediately recognize his touch. I've always thought Klaus was one of those.

LW: Probably one of the more recognizable. And this job will be interesting for me because I think my pencils are pretty damn tight, so it's going to be a wild marriage, my specific, tight pencil style and his very definite inking style. Still, when Bob Harras asked who I would like to have ink this, I didn't hesitate; I said Klaus Janson. I've only met the guy a couple of times, but I felt a real kind of kindred spirit there. If I live long enough and I could do enough jobs I'd love to work with all the guys I grew up admiring and whose work I was fol-

HENRI!
YOU SON OF A THIEF! IT'S BEEN TOO LONG!
HATE TO BREAK UP THE RE-UNION, BUT YOUR BUDDY BROKE THROUGH OUR SECURITY SYSTEM, CAJUN...
...AND I WANNA KNOW HOW!

lowing.

You know, when I first took over Daredevil it occurred to me how hard it would be to find a Marvel core book from the '60s that has had such a diverse yet consistently excellent run of artists. From Wally Wood to John Romita to Gene Colan to Bob Brown to Gil Kane to Frank Miller to Dave Mazzucchelli to J.R. Junior. Those guys are...

BC: Not a shabby lineup, is it?

LW: Every one of them brought unique strengths to the book. Gene Colan with his expressionistic approach to drawing—Gil Kane, the master of anatomy—Frank Miller, the supreme storyteller—and Mazzucchelli, who is my personal favorite, though boy, I'd love to work with Miller.

BC: Frank, if you're out there reading this...

LW: Oh, he's heard it from me. He heard it from a snoockered Lee Weeks at last year's Marvel Christmas party. I would love to work with Frank Miller just so I could maybe learn a piece of whatever it is he knows, so that maybe some of his instincts might rub off on me.

BC: Along the lines of what's ahead for you—do you have any sort of "wish list" of projects? If you had to name three things you'd like to work on in the next, say, five years, what would they be?

LW: You know, you've just revealed to me that I need to do something. I need to lay out some new, specific goals for myself, because right now I don't know that I have three. OK, I'm just making it up on the spot, but (1) I'd like to create, write, and draw a series, something that I could really express myself through. (2) I'd love to—and I know the character's been done to death, but still—I would love to have my shot at doing a big Batman project. (3) And to work with Frank Miller.

Pah! SECURITY !?!
EVERYTHING'S FINE. HENRI'S A FRIEND OF MINE FROM NEW ORLEANS.
WHY DIDN'T THE PROFESSOR OR PSYLOCKE PICK 'IM UP TELE-PATHICALLY?
AN' HOW DID YOU KNOW HE WAS HERE?

"I WOULD LOVE TO WORK WITH FRANK MILLER."

BC: So if you're listening, Frank, Lee's phone number is...

LW: Seriously, one of the best things about the comics business today is that there are so many ways to be involved, so many choices, so many ways it can be done. I'm still trying to get up the courage to try some of the other ways of doing it, by creating my own stuff or whatever.

People grumble about what's going on in this industry, and believe me, you know, I do plenty of that myself. There's a lot of crap out there, but I don't want to lose sight of the fact there's some really talented guys working. I think sometimes that fact tends to get overlooked because there is so much crap, but percentage-wise I suspect it's not all that different than it's ever been. Just think of all the talent out there--from Miller and Mazzucchelli to Mike Mignola, Andy Kubert, Jose Luiz Garcia-Lopez, Jerry Ordway, Matt Wagner, John Byrne—there are just tons and tons of talented guys.

BC: Well, I think you're exactly right about the sheer volume of material clouding our perceptions. The example I like to use is, say in the past there were 100 comics being published, and 10 of them were quote-unquote "quality" books. That means you have a quality-to-crap ratio of 10%. Today, let's say there are 300 comics being published, and

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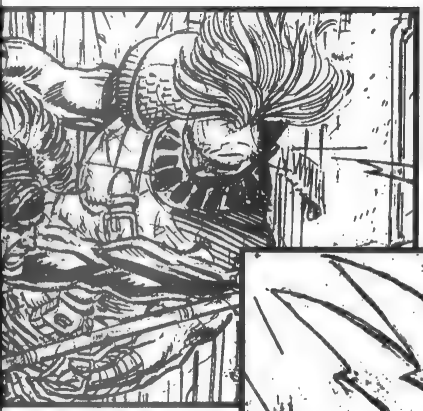
WE GOT COMPANY.
"... LET
CAN
FINA

IT PLAY. THEY
ANDLE IT. "
KOOM

the quality-to-crap ratio is 5%. Guess what? You have 15 quality books out there! And the market may not be as diverse as we'd like, but it's still diverse enough so, say, someone like Sergio Aragones can carve himself a monthly niche with Groo.

LW: That's right. And then you look at a guy like Mark Schultz. He puts out one book a year, and I'm sure it wasn't a great living for awhile doing one book a year, but he stuck to his guns and stayed with his gut instinct—you know, "Never sacrifice any artistic integrity." Now he's struck this animation deal [for the Cadillacs & Dinosaurs cartoon series], so he can continue to work in the way that's most comfortable for him, to maintain that painstaking craftsmanship that he's always shown. I think the flexibility of the business today is just incredible.

Speaking of Mark Schultz, a couple of years ago I was visiting him in his apartment and he took me into his living room and he had this big, framed original Hal Foster Tarzan Sunday page. I sat in a trance staring at it for about a half an hour. I just could not believe it. Apparently Al Williamson had loaned it



"I THINK GAMBIT WILL HAVE A VERY DIFFERENT, DISTINCT LOOK."

to him to hang in his apartment for inspiration.

BC: That's a good Mark story and a good Al story, too.

LW: What a guy...

BC: And what a great natural resource for the industry! How many times have I bought a volume of newspaper strip reprints and seen acknowledgments like, "Many thanks to Al Williamson, who loaned us the strips necessary to complete this book."

LW: Al's got most of them. I think he's got the largest collection of Flash Gordon originals. He doesn't live too far from here, so I've been up to visit him a number of times. He's about an hour and a half north of here, and I drive up once in awhile. It seems as if I'm always going through his originals and saying, "My God, I can't believe it!" He's got loads of great stuff, not just [Hal] Foster or [Alex] Raymond. Loads of it.

BC: Last question: what do you think is going to make the Gambit mini-series stand out from all the other X-Men titles that are out there?

LW: I want to answer this truthfully, but I don't want to come off

sounding like an egomaniac or anything. I think Gambit will have a very different, distinct look. There's more of a linear, cinematic approach to the storytelling in this entire series, from what Howard's doing with the writing and what I'm trying to do with the artwork, and less of an "in your face" dynamic...

God, that answer sounds so pretentious! Okay, there's one thing I can add. I think this book will have what we haven't seen in X-Men for awhile, though it's not like it hasn't been there before, because I've seen it in some of Gambit's earlier appearances, is there'll be a real moodiness to it. I guess that's what I was getting at with the more direct, linear, cinematic approach to the storytelling, there will also be a definite moodiness to it. Now that might actually be something that some of the fans might not be attracted to right off, because it's not as open to color. There's more blacks, there's more...

BC: More of a film noir approach?

LW: Yeah. Maybe this is just my own fixation, but Gambit strikes me as your dark, brooding hero. If there is a Batman- or a Daredevil-type in the X-Men, I think it's Gambit. And I think all the mystery that surrounds him, that we're all trying to figure out, lends itself to that interpretation, also.□

"MAYBE THIS IS JUST MY OWN FIXATION, BUT GAMBIT STRIKES ME AS YOUR DARK, BROODING HERO."